

Sorcery beliefs and practices in Gumine: a source of conflict and insecurity



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INTRODUCTION

Oxfam International Papua New Guinea (PNG) through its peacebuilding and conflict reduction programme in the Highlands of PNG conducts research that informs programme and policy developments. This paper is an overview of research findings that were conducted as a part of the Security and Community Initiative Research (SACIR) project in Gumine District of the Simbu Province, working with affected people to explore their own situation, develop their own criteria of risk and determine local solutions to these problems. The aim of the study was to explore how individuals and communities perceived insecurity, and how this related to incidences of violence; looking at the nature of violence and conflict, common triggers and impacts. At all sites that were visited, sorcery was often mentioned as a trigger and source of violence and conflict in the community. This report will discuss those findings related to the practice of witchcraft and sorcery and how this relates to insecurities faced in many families and the wider community in Gumine District. The results are presented here in the context of recent literature on sorcery, in particular important studies by the Health Services with IMR (Institute of Medical Research) and the Melanesian Institute. It is hoped that this material will help to increase the understanding amongst Oxfam staff of the nature and consequences of belief in sorcery and the role of the church and judiciary. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which Oxfam can work with its local partners to mitigate or reduce some of the harmful consequences of sorcery beliefs.

BACKGROUND

Sorcery in Papua New Guinea

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (1977), sorcery and witchcraft is defined as *“ritual performance that is thought to lead to the influencing of human or natural events by an external and impersonal mystical force beyond the ordinary human sphere”* (cited in Zocca and Urame 2008: 10). The majority of Papua New Guineans do not accept natural causes as an explanation for misfortunes such as sickness, accidents or death - instead these are attributed to supernatural causes which we have grouped under the collective term of “Sorcery”¹. Those accused of Sorcery are considered to have deliberately caused misfortune through use of supernatural powers; they are usually punished by death, injury, destruction of property or exile. Police reports show that victims have been buried alive, beheaded, choked to death, thrown over cliffs or into rivers or caves, starved, axed, electrocuted, suffocated with smoke, forced to drink petrol, stoned or shot (Amnesty International 2009).

¹ In Papua New Guinea terms such as the pidgin *sanguma*, poison and witchcraft (together with a multitude of terms in local languages) may be understood in different ways including: the possession of people by evil beings which take animal form and which confer supernatural powers on their hosts (usually referred to as *sanguma* or *kumo* in Simbu); forcing of a harmful object or substance into the victim so that they become sick or die, control of external powers intrinsic to the person of the sorcerer which enable that person to inflict sickness or death by willpower alone; and the ability to become invisible or to fly. Sorcery may involve contagious magic (malevolent actions on the ‘leavings’ of a person), or involve causing direct physical harm to the victim. In this paper, as in Gibbs and Wailoni (2009), we have decided to use the capitalized word Sorcery to cover all these, meaning the use of magical power to influence events.

There is a perception that sorcery related attacks are increasing in the Highlands, although this may be partly due to a recent surge in media interest in the phenomenon²; a lack of data on the past make true comparisons difficult. The study by the Health Services and Institute of Medical Research (IMR) suggests an increase in the number of sorcery-related attacks (Health Services and IMR 2004: 14). The Health Services conducted an inquiry into the growing number of people suspected of being sorcerers presenting to health services for treatment. They also note an increase in patients who believed their sickness was a direct result of the practice of sorcery as well as relatives of those deceased seeking a post-mortem to determine the cause of death. These phenomena were mostly recorded in EHP and Simbu province or amongst those originating from Simbu.

Some argue that the apparent growing number of accusations of sorcery is a convenient disguise for premeditated murder based more on a person's dislike for another, rivalry or revenge, rather than a deep-rooted traditional belief of sorcery. There is also a concern that many murders may be linked to the prevalence of HIV, the disease being seen as the result of the practice of witchcraft and sorcery magic (Varolli 2010). The Health Services study attributes the increase in sorcery accusations in recent years to high expectations that have turned into frustration and anxiety as many have found themselves excluded from the benefits of development. The increase in sorcery cases may be a sign of this social stress (Health Services and IMR 2004: 23). Historical studies looking at European witchcraft also link this phenomenon to social change (Health Services and IMR 2004: 15).

The Health Services/IMR study looks at the changes that have taken place that may have contributed to a change in sorcery accusations from an 'endemic' to an 'epidemic' state. Older people described changes in killings of suspected sorcerers in recent years; they said that in the past, killings had the following characteristics:

1. Occurred occasionally and only after careful consideration by elders that it was necessary for the well-being of the community, now hearsay and rumor play a much larger role in accusations;
2. Never took place in public;
3. The body was never displaced for fear of the spirit entering another person;
4. No children or young people allowed to witness the killings;
5. Killing done with arrows or spears with weapons discarded with the body after the killing.

These characteristics no longer hold today, and the changes were said to have taken place after the 1980s. It has also been suggested that in the past spirits and ancestors were more often blamed for misfortune, but as these beliefs were suppressed by the church, accusations came to be focused instead on living people (Lederman in Zocca 2009).

Another reason why sorcery must be of concern to organizations such as Oxfam is that the accused are often the most vulnerable in society – for example in Simbu the majority of accused in the last few years are women related to the deceased and aged between 40-60 years (Zocca 2009: 27)³. A report by Amnesty International (2009:22) suggests that women are six times more likely to be accused of sorcery than men). As we will see in this paper widows and the elderly are often targeted in Gumine.

² The media reported the deaths of 50 women in 2009 through sorcery related attacks; according to the CEDAW 2010 PNG status report such cases have doubled in recent times (Varolli 2010).

The Minister of Community Development, Dame Carol Kidu in a statement to a UN committee on PNG's progress to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) said data collection on the number of attacks and deaths is lacking (Varolli 2010). A call for more research on the issue was also made in a conference held in Madang in 2009 on 'Law on sorcery and sorcery-related killings' (Gumar 2009). In Simbu, one of the earliest studies was in the 1950s when anthropologist Paula Brown described sorcery in her book *The Simbu: A Study of Change in the New Guinea Highlands* (1972) as a powerful weapon of revenge (Brown 1972 in Zocca 2009: 18). There have been several other books and dissertations on sorcery in Simbu, particularly in the 1980s, but the most recent is the publication 'Sanguma in Paradise' (2009) by the Melanesian Institute in Goroka that looks at sorcery in both Simbu Province and many other parts of the country.

Profile of sorcery in Simbu Province and Gumine district

Simbu Province is made up of six districts; this study was conducted in the Gumine District situated in the central part of the province. The reason for the choice of this district was the presence of Oxfam's partner, Community Development Agency (see below). Mountainous and difficult terrain, high population density, and a lack of economic opportunities have led to high levels of out-migration.

The part of the Melanesian Institute study which focuses on Simbu (Zocca 2009) looked at records kept in hospitals, police stations and churches which then formed the basis for interviews to be carried out. Simbu Province police records showed 67 incidents relating to Sorcery from April 2000 to June 2005 in which 92 people were accused of Sorcery and were severely injured or killed (Zocca 2009: 21). According to these records Gumine had the highest number of cases with 32 persons in total injured or killed in witchcraft or sorcery related attacks (13 men and 19 women); of these, 26 died from their injuries. The majority of these victims were in the 40-65 age range for both men and women. Kundiawa Hospital records supported this with 75% of the cases presenting for treatment of sorcery-related injuries were elderly (Zocca 2009: 23). Again, proportionally more females (31/48) than males presented (17/48). The police records suggest that Gumine is the most affected district both in terms of the number of sorcery-related incidents and the incidence of fatal attacks on the accused⁴. These official records show a slightly higher proportion of cases affecting women rather than men, but interviews suggest that the disparity is in fact much greater, most respondents suggesting that women bear the brunt of sorcery accusations and attacks.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodologies were used, including Participatory Rural Appraisal tools and techniques which allowed violence and insecurity to be expressed in different ways by participants. The following diagrammatic exercises were used:

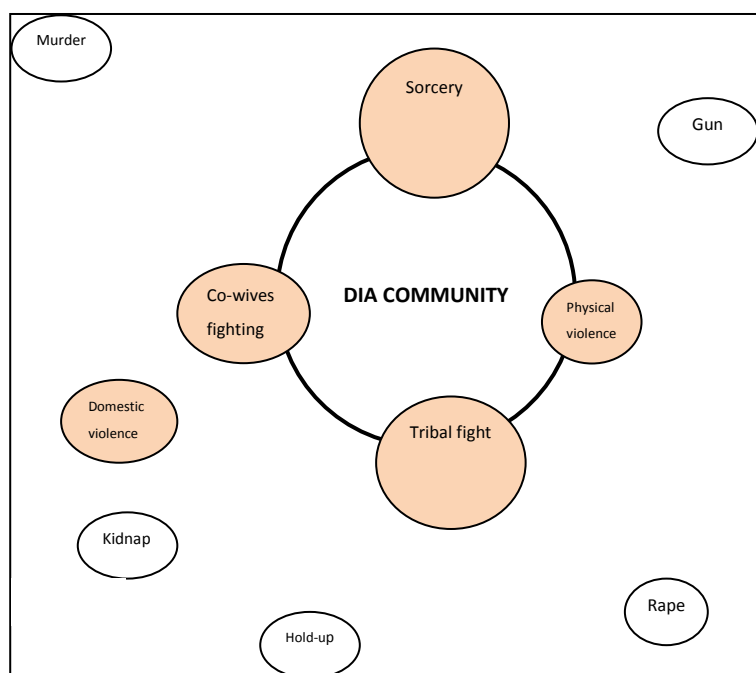
Community Map – a graphical representation mapping the impact of insecurity on mobility. The mapping exercise gave participants the opportunity to examine geographical areas of insecurity in their community

⁴ Gumine actually has the smallest population of any district in Simbu, so the high number of sorcery-related attacks cannot be attributed to a high population.

and to identify areas for improvement. It was the first exercise to be done by participants, creating a dialogue among participants and with the research team.

Venn Diagram – following the community mapping exercise the Venn diagram was used to explore types of violence, the frequency with which they occurred and their impact on the lives of men and women respectively. Circles representing each type of violence were drawn: the closer a circle to the community circle in the centre, the more frequent the type of violence represented. The size of the circles indicated the strength of the impact on the group concerned. The highlighted circles are the types of violence affecting the group undertaking the exercise (men and women separately). An example is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Venn diagram of adult women from Dia (Kumai-Bomai LLG)



Problem Tree – is a problem analysis of the main triggers and corresponding effects of violence.

Peace Circle – was developed upon reflection and analysis of the problem tree for participants to form local solutions that were practical and useful to the community.

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were utilized for deeper analysis of the aspects of violence and security that emerged through the diagramming techniques. By using different techniques, we were able to draw attention to diverse perspectives, and confirm findings through triangulation. The participatory nature of the study provided a voice to groups vulnerable to violence and drew attention to a broadened notion of security and to locally appropriate intervention strategies. It allowed people



to develop their own criteria of risks and their own ideas about what appropriate interventions might look like. Through the exercises participants were able to identify the root causes of problems and what needed to be done to reduce the risk of violence. Participants stated that it helped to have people from outside their community facilitate and guide them through the process so that they could critically reflect on their own lives.

Participants

The participants in PRA exercises formed four groups: adult men, adult women, young men and young women. The exercises were conducted separately with each group, providing an opportunity for all to voice their concerns and experiences. Each group consisted of 5-10 participants, however at times there were more depending on the level of motivation and interest of the community to participate. Each group identified a literate person who drew up the diagrams while the rest contributed ideas.



Participants made themselves available for the research after notification by community facilitators (see below). This was later followed by a second briefing on the research by the team upon arrival in the community. Recruitment of participants for interviews was done with the help of community facilitators, leaders and spokes people in the community. Often interviews would be carried out those who had participated in the PRA exercises but were still interested to go into further detail on issues that concerned their community.

Study Sites

Oxfam supports the work of a local organisation, Community Development Agency (CDA) which has a geographical focus on Gumine District. In those villages where the agency has a presence, it supports community facilitators responsible for community mobilization and training. The research was conducted in eight communities, including sites both with and without a CDA presence. The study covered locations in all three Local Level Government (LLG) areas of the District. The communities are listed below:

Digine LLG - Kelmakeli and Gaima (two tribal enemies): Kelmakeli is situated up the mountain and is about two hours walk from the main Gumine road. Kelmakeli has experienced election-related violence in 2007 with its neighboring tribe Gaima. Gaima is near the main Gumine highway. Gaima experienced tribal violence with Kelmakeli during the 2007 national elections.

Kumai-Bomai LLG (three communities with no CDA presence): Dia community is about 30km from Kundiawa town. It is located at a high altitude and is very cold almost throughout the day. Dia had no CDA community facilitator at the time of the study, however the community was motivated and well organized. The community also experiences tribal conflict during election periods and other issues, mostly related to

women, may cause tribal violence from time to time. Interviews were also conducted in two neighboring communities: Diayuri and Gomgale.

Gumine LLG – (three non-tribal conflict communities): The Gumine highway passes through Kewaldien, Bokoloma and Bokil villages. Tribal violence is rare and the communities are relatively peaceful, although other types of violence were identified. In Kewaledian the last tribal fight was in 2001 which only lasted two months. Bokolma is about ten minutes walk from Kewaledian. It is also near the Gumine highway and experiences tribal conflict every 15-20 years. Bokil is about 15 minutes walk up the hill from Bokolma. Tribal violence occurs once in a while, the last tribal fight was experienced in 2001. PRA exercises were conducted in Bokil whilst interviews were conducted in Kawaladien and Bokolma.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration is very important when conducting research on insecurity and requires an extreme sensitivity to the context and to the needs of the participants. Many participants have been traumatized by many years of conflict and internal displacement. Others have suffered long term violence in marriage or within the family. Consent was thus sought prior to interviews being carried out and confidentiality was maintained and emphasized to participants throughout the interview.

Ethical considerations also demand that the findings should be presented back to the community. Presentation of initial findings was duly made to each community, encouraging young people and women to do the presentation. These events represented an opportunity for discussion and debate on main issues that were identified through the research. Participants at all study sites confirmed that the data presented was a true impression of their community.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Beliefs about sorcery in Simbu

Every society has its own explanations of the world and is interested about how and why things happen the way they do. Simbu people like those in other parts of PNG and in the rest of Melanesia have a deep commitment to family relations, strong connections with the land and beliefs in the spiritual world. These beliefs and customs are passed through oral history: ancestral stories and myths promote this idea of a non-empirical world that has an influence on the physical realm. The study showed that feelings of insecurity were closely linked to this belief system. In the community mapping exercise, places of insecurity were identified by participants. People fear both the spirits of the dead and locations associated with them, including cemeteries and places where deaths had occurred such as battle-fields, rivers where people had drowned or sites of intentional killings. Mountains, thick bush or forest and rivers or creeks that have a particular significance or story attached to them are also places that people fear and avoid. The main fear was of ancestral spirits often referred to as '*masalais*', which may take human form and which live in the mountains or bush away from human settlement. Belief in these spirits has implications other than simple avoidance of certain sites: at one site that was visited, most men have two wives. If the first wife tries to run away men may threaten to throw her clothes into the *masalai* stone, suggesting that she will eventually die wherever she is. Men take advantage of this and have more than one wife. The

Health Services study mentions the belief that misfortunes caused by disturbing areas occupied by spirits or *masalais* can either bring good fortune or bad (Health Services and IMR 2004:17-18).

Sorcery (usually referred to as *sanguma*) was one of the issues most commonly mentioned at all study sites. Respondents expressed fear of the practice of sorcery and of perceived sorcerers who they believe can directly harm themselves and their families, or bring about misfortune. The use of sorcery powers were also linked to disasters occurring during warfare. For example, if a woman asks questions about how guns are used, their provenance or purpose; and a man is subsequently killed in a fight, then his death will be blamed on the woman. Women therefore, refrain from asking about the ownership and use of guns. They keep well away from the affairs of men when it comes to tribal fights or guns, as it is seen to be men's affair and questions will draw suspicion upon them.

According to Zocca (2009), in Simbu the most common form of destructive magic is known as *kumo*. This term refers to an animal form which takes possession of a person and forces him/her to do evil things. Despite this idea that the person practicing sorcery is possessed, they are still considered responsible for the evil actions. *Kumo* is often used interchangeably with the pidgin word *sanguma*, which has a broader meaning, and thus today *kumo* signifies both the intruding creatures and Sorcery in general (Zocca 2009: 20). '*Sangumas*' are accused of causing illness, killing people, causing other misfortunes, feeding on the flesh of dead people, feeding on human flesh, internal organs and waste, and taking the form of animals. It is believed that the use of these powers is most likely to affect the immediate family. Those perceived to possess those powers are despised and avoided.

The phenomenon of sorcery and witchcraft is an explanation used to understand unusual events, especially those of a harmful nature (Health Services and IMR 2004: 15). '*Today hardly any death or sickness is regarded as natural or accidental by the Simbus*' (Zocca 2009:32). 'Abnormal' symptoms of illness or sudden death, sickness and misfortune lead to suspicions of sorcery.

"We live close to each other and when one falls ill or a leader gets sick, they immediately accuse people who they believe they practice sorcery. They burn their houses and attack them" (young woman, Bokolma).

People reflect on anything that the victim of the sorcery attack could have done that would have brought on the misfortune. When there is an unexplained death in the village people start to ponder who might have wanted the deceased dead, they remember their movements over the past few days and with whom they may have come into contact. An example would be a person falling sick after taking food given by someone else. In Gumine, young men said they only take food from their mothers because of this insecurity. The accusation would be made against the person that cooked the food and gave it, usually a female. A possible candidate is suggested and this then becomes hear-say; rumors gain momentum and, with increased support from the community, they may lead to an attack. *"Someone dies and then people will start talking and then someone will start whispering and saying well you know, it might be this person"* (Father Phil Gibbs in McLeod 2004). Even when medical explanations are given relating to the cause of death, there was always the question of, 'then what caused the illness or medical condition of the deceased?' *"A readiness to be deceived relieves people of the need to enquire further"* (Health Services and IMR 2004: 27).

When several people from the same family or community fall sick or die it is believed to be the work of sorcerers. Such deaths may require more than one sorcerer and an agreement reached about the persons to be killed. When people argue over land, they are attentive to the words used during the dispute. If later one of the men dies, then those involved in the dispute may be accused of Sorcery. Any behaviour out of the ordinary near the time of death can make a person a potential suspect of the death (Zocca 2009: 27). The main motives behind supposed acts of sorcery include an outstanding debt not yet settled; feelings of jealousy, envy or resentment of that person and anything that may have angered the sorcerer. Even when an abnormally large number of livestock or domestic animals die it may be blamed on acts of sorcery. The accused assert that accusations are made when people want to take over their land or possessions and when there are existing disagreements between the parties.

“..for instance, if you have credit with other people and have not repaid it, there is a possibility that you will be attacked. It is a big problem here and has resulted in fights between families, clan” (young woman, Kewaledian).

Innocent people can be accused of sorcery and killed out of jealousy or for revenge. Participants in Gumine acknowledged that indeed, innocent people have been blamed and killed over the death of others. Those that are accused of sorcery hold grudges against the people that have accused them, causing on-going tensions and long term rifts within communities.

“Innocent people are being killed because of being suspected of sanguma, while others have long lasting conflicts” (young man, Kelawadian).

Identity of sorcerers

People harbor stereotypes about who practices sorcery and is thus in the possession of an evil power. Although Sorcery accusations can be directed at both men and women particularly elderly women are usually the first to be blamed and first to be targeted when there is an unexplained death or misfortune that is experienced. In Gumine one women's group stated that *“when men die they put pressure on us the women and we are the first accused”*. Respondents at all sites visited for this study said women were the first targets of sorcery accusations when there was a death in the village. In Gumine adult women live with a constant fear of being accused of sorcery. Some women mentioned that it is in fact men who practice sorcery, but manage to avoid accusation by blaming women.

⁵ Other studies on Simbu found that sorcerers are often identified by their appearance and behavior. They look dirty and have sores on their body, they are seen at odd hours at night, they behave strangely during funerals, look for human waste, and they are always hungry for meat and stare at people when they are eating. The sorcerer would have been seen around the place or area where the incident occurred. Weak and unimportant people are more likely to be accused (Zocca 2009: 27).

“Sanguma related violence affects the mothers a lot because they are the main ones who are accused when someone dies in the community” (adult women, Kelmakeli).

“The accusation of practicing witchcraft always leads to problems and troubles in the community. Women especially the elderly are the common suspects of practicing sanguma” (adult woman, Kewaledian).

Acts of sorcery are usually believed to occur within families: participants shared stories of being accused and beaten by their own family members. One woman said that after her husband's death, she was blamed for his death and suffered beatings at the hands of her own sons. Another woman stated that her mother had been tortured and burnt by young men in their family after the death of her father. This pattern is confirmed in the literature, which also suggests that accusations most often occur between close relatives, creating disharmony, and family break-ups. The conflict and tension between the family and parties involved is long-lasting and often people do not see face after accusations are made and even after peace is brokered and some form of compensation paid for the shame.

Impact of Sorcery accusations

Torture, exile and murder

During the research respondents stated that sorcery related violence or killing occurs only occasionally and not every time that a death occurs; it commonly follows deaths of young men because it is said that they have a long life ahead of them and it has been cut short. Victims are tortured and interrogated sometimes at gun-point to admit to the offence and to call the names of other sorcerers⁶. Accused persons said the only way they could put an end to the torture was by admitting to the deed.

“When people are reluctant to say they are involved in Sanguma activities they are forced with gun to confess that they are one of them” (young woman, Bokil).

This may involve testing whether the sorcerer does in fact the powers they profess to have by public display. For example, telling the accused to empty the contents of a can of fish without it being opened. If need be a witch-doctor or diviner called a '*glasman*' is brought in to identify the sorcerer who caused the death. Calling on *glasman* as a way to confirm suspicions demonstrates that 'proper procedures' have been followed (Health Services and IMR 2004: 7). A witch-doctor may be brought in from another place: for example, the relatives of one deceased person in Gumine sought an explanation by talking to a witchdoctor in Madang, who then revealed the 'cause' of the death.

A number of respondents reported that, following confession or 'confirmation' of the suspect's guilt, they are often beaten and banished from the community rather than killed and that, whilst sorcery-related killings in the past were very high, these have been reduced now to casting out the accused⁷. Often the

⁶ Also recorded by Zocca (2009), who mentions that in Simbu, accusations of Sorcery may be confirmed (or refuted) by responses during questioning: if the accused fails to answer appropriately according to the judgment of the questioners, then they conclude that she is a Sorcery practitioner and they torture her or even kill her. Some confessions are also exacted under torture.

⁷ It is difficult to judge whether this preference for banishment (noted in two communities) is real or increasing; Zocca (2009:28) notes that in Simbu, there is preference to kill the accused rather than just banishing them from the

close relatives of the accused cannot bear the exile of their mothers or wives and leave also, resulting in the effective departure of entire families. At one site visited about 20 households had left in this way. The literature suggests that in Simbu sorcery-related displacement is a widespread phenomenon: one source estimates that it has caused the dislocation of 10-15% of the Simbu population⁸. The displaced fall into four main categories: those accused of sorcery practices who have been physically attacked and banished; those who were accused and have run away for fear of their lives; supporters of the accused and lastly, a group of (usually successful) people who have left their communities out of a fear of sorcery itself and the destruction that those practicing it might bring to their property and wellbeing (Zocca 2009: 29-30).

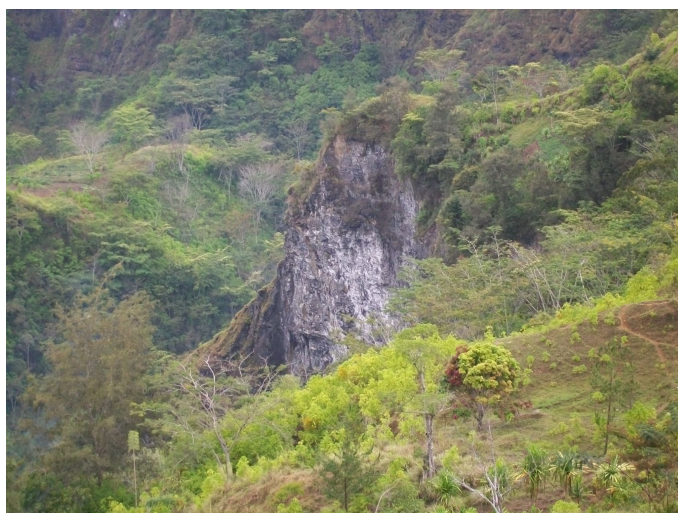
Although banishment is certainly a common punishment meted out to those accused of sorcery; injury and death are also perpetrated on the accused.

“Sangumas are killed in different ways like thrown in the river, toilet, shot with gun and even burnt alive” (young man, Kelawadian).

Sorcery-related attacks recorded during this research included:

- Burning with fire and hot iron rods
- Cutting with knives
- Beating with iron rods
- Tying up and beating
- Throwing into a river
- Throwing off a cliff side (see Figure 3)
- Banished from the community their house burnt and property destroyed
- Buried alive (two elderly women and one elderly man)

Figure 2: A cliff from which people accused of practicing sorcery are thrown



“We kill people who are suspected of practicing sorcery. They usually chop them up, drown them in the river or even throw them off the cliff while still alive” (adult man, Damagire).

“The people suspected of Sanguma have their hands and legs tied up and put into a bag and taken up to the mountain and rolled down the hill. We have witnessed it” (young woman, Bokil).

community as sorcery can even be practiced from a distance, and the death itself may kill the kumo inside. Simbu. Police records suggest that between 2000 and 2005 42% of all sorcery-related killings in the Province occurred in Gumine district. One blogger reports that, according to Police records, half of all murder cases in 2008 in Simbu were sorcery related, but this requires verification (Malum Nalu 2009).

⁸ Estimate by the Catholic bishop of Kundiawa (in Zocco 2009).

Wider violence in the community

In some instances the accused person's relatives retaliate with violence. These fights get bigger when the accused has their supporters as well, dividing families and clans.

"If a house is closer to the accused sorcerer's house they will say you are the witchcraft and they will burn his house and attack him. His people nearby will come in support of the accuser and retaliate and the fight will get worse. This is what they do" (young woman, Bokolma).

These conflicts have a serious impact in terms of destruction of property. In 2006 one male respondent in Gumine burnt down one of his brother's houses. At another site, the last tribal fight experienced was in 2001 and was a direct result of sorcery allegations: a woman was accused of killing her own husband by his relatives, who attacked the woman's family, burning down houses and property. At yet another site, the last incident of a sorcery-related killing (in 2002) also resulted in wider violence.

Sanguma leads to tribal fights, *"especially when case is not mediated well or when people are not satisfied with the mediation, they argue and fight. The fight gets worse, houses are burnt and people are killed"* (young woman, Bokolma).

Just calling another person a 'sanguma' can lead to violence. Those accused in this way are insulted, causing anger and disunity among the family, clan or community.

"I was in Goroka with my husband to do some work when he called me and my mother witch (sanguma). From this addressing, we had an argument which led to him compensating my mother" (adult women, Gumine).

"If a woman calls another lady a sanguma, they fight over it. Support fight especially leading to big fight" (young man, Gaima).

Factors which encourage sorcery-related violence: evidence from the literature

Many murders are committed in public so that other sorcerers are warned of the consequences of practicing their magic, or using their powers. These acts are condoned by the community at large – they encourage conformity and discourage unacceptable behavior – why then can't similar actions be carried out on thieves or those who commit other wrongs?⁹ The justification for barbarous acts committed against sorcerers is that removal of the accused prevents further deaths and misfortune. One police officer in Simbu stated *"Once they eliminate the sorcerer they feel safe because they are saving other human beings too. That's what they believe in"* (in McLeod 2004). More than half the students in Simbu interviewed in the Health Services study said the removal of a witch brought relief to the community. Less than half said it increased fear or felt indifferent to the incident (Health Services and IMR 2004: 9). The perpetrators of the torture and violence are usually young men. Young male perpetrators take the lead to attack the sorcerers in an attempt to gain recognition and appreciation from the community (Zocca 2009: 29). The public stage upon which acts of torture take place against sorcerers makes it difficult for those who might possibly try

⁹ Despite this, these acts do not necessarily deter crime (Patterson in Health Services and IMR, 2004: 15).

to intervene (Health Services and IMR 2004: 7-8). Few take the side of the accused or try to resolve the problem, often through fear of association with the accused; such fears also limit the potential of better educated people to influence the mindset of others.

Local solutions suggested by participants

During the study a peace circle exercise was used to that drew on local ideas to address current issues of insecurity in villages. Here suggestions included the development of community laws prohibiting use of violence against people accused of sorcery. At one site, young men interviewed who confessed to being centrally involved in sorcery-related killings said they had only recently learnt about the sorcery act in the media and would therefore refrain from inflicting violence on people accused of sorcery – they stated that when someone dies there should not be any Sorcery accusations and insults. At other sites participants responded by saying that acts of sorcery are spiritual in nature and must be brought to the attention of pastors to deal with it in terms of praying and casting out that demon or evil spirit from those accused of practicing sorcery. Others thought it should best be left to the law enforcement authorities to deal with. Respondents at one site thought that the use of a witch-doctor or *glasman* should be made more legitimate in order to put groundless suspicions to rest. At two sites many thought the banishment or removal of those who were thought to practice sorcery out of the community was positive in that it constituted a less violent approach to the matter than killing or torturing the accused.

None of the solutions suggested by participants called into question the existence of sorcery itself and indeed only one participant in this study seemed to think that sorcery accusations might be groundless. This was after he himself had been accused of sorcery. Now he tried to prevent other clan members from making accusations and in doing so relates misfortune, death and sickness to natural causes.

The role of the police and judiciary

Local enforcement agencies, although aware of the enormity of the problem are not able to intervene. A police officer in Kundiawa confirmed that it is difficult to intervene during an attack as a handful of policemen cannot control a large mob of people who are determined to '*put right what is wrong*'¹⁰. Most cases involving sorcery murders are never reported and there is little cooperation in investigations carried out to prosecute those implicated in the death. Other Government officials including Ward Councilors may be better able to intervene. In May 2009 a fight would have erupted after the deaths of two children was blamed upon two women and a man if it had not been for the local counselor who was able to respond and stopped the conflict from escalating.

As mentioned above, there was some awareness of the Sorcery Act amongst respondents, but the stated aim of the act is to '*to prevent and punish evil practices of sorcery and other similar evil practices*'. Thus the law explicitly acknowledges the 'existence' of sorcery and criminalizes those who practice it. Although, as in any western-inspired court system proof is required, all parties concerned (including the court magistrates) believe in sorcery, the 'proof' provided by a diviner may be sufficient to send the accused to prison (Longgar 2009). Use of the court system and sorcery act may however prevent summary executions and lynching.

¹⁰ Comment made during visit of the UN rapporteur to PNG (at a meeting in Kundiawa attended by the author).

The Sorcery Act does have the merit of also criminalizing the torturers and killers of accused sorcerers. It is stated in the preamble that there *'is a danger that any law that deals fully with sorcery may encourage some evil -intentioned people to make baseless or merely spiteful or malicious accusations that their enemies are sorcerers solely to get them into trouble with other people, and this is a thing that the law should prevent'*. But in reality penalties and provisions outlines in the Act focus mostly on the sorcerer as perpetrator, and do not adequately cater for instances in which the alleged sorcerer is the victim which presumably should be considered under legal charges of assault, manslaughter or murder. Zocca (2009:23) reports that of the 67 Sorcery related incidents in Simbu recorded by the police between 2000 and 2005 (including 92 persons dead or injured) only six affidavits were produced regarding killers of suspected witches and only two people were eventually sentenced.

On a national level the PNG Government had little to say when asked about what it was doing to stop the murders of women accused of Sorcery when questioned by a UN inspection on women's rights in August 2010 in New York (Varolli 2010). In a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur to PNG (including Simbu) it was stated that there was failure on the state to prevent and investigate sorcery accusations (Amnesty International 2010: 7).

The role of the church

During this study, adult men in Gumine mentioned that church workers try to save people's lives and prevent them from becoming victims of sorcery, by speaking out against people practicing sorcery and driving fear into people (sorcerers) who practice such things. This suggests then that, for the church it is not the accusers that are the problem, but those accused of sorcery. On the other hand it may have a moderating role:

"Some religious people say it (sickness) is the Lords will but those who do not go to church captures suspects and ask them questions. If they believe they are Sanguma they throw them off the cliff" (young woman, Bokil).

According to Zocca (2009), the approach of the catholic church in Simbu, lead by the Bishop Henk te Maarsen has been countering the spread of witch hunts through an 8-point pastoral approach including encouragement of the consideration of natural causes after a death, teaching about the causes of sickness, meetings and courses on witchcraft, giving shelter to the accused, reporting to the police, and visits to families of both accusers and accused. The diocese of Kundiawa has the policy of excluding from the sacraments those accusing others of sorcery. However despite this position, the majority of Catholic Church leaders believe that efforts must focus on stopping witches from continuing their evil practices. Others stress attacking people's fear of witchcraft by convincing the faithful to rely on God's superior power. In the case of other denominations the great majority of leaders now share fully in the beliefs of their people – they therefore subscribe to the belief that sorcerers are in possession of an evil power which enables them to kill someone, normally within blood relatives. The presentation of the Lutheran church at the 'Sanguma in Paradise' seminar similarly reveals that for the district president of that church, the 'victims' are those who have been 'bewitched' (Zocca 2009).

CONCLUSION

A quotation from Zocco (2009) summarizes the impact of Sorcery in Simbu province:

“The fact that, in their majority, the accused and killed people in Simbu are elderly women or people of low position in society is already a sign that something terribly wrong is going on in that society”.

Perhaps the most terrible thing about such accusations is that, based on suspicion and hearsay, they cannot be refuted by the accused. The usual instruments of criminal justice such as material evidence and testimonials of witnesses cannot be brought to bear.

The community, so often a support mechanism, is the main perpetrator of this violence. Barbaric acts sanctioned by the community are a reflection of the lack of awareness and understanding of two things:

- People do not understand or believe in the natural causes behind misfortune and thus attribute it to sorcery, seeking to pin the blame on an individual.
- The ‘evidence’ used to implicate people in the practice of sorcery should be invalid in any legal court, and yet is seen to be legitimate enough to justify extra-judicial killing, maiming and exile of large numbers of people.

Accusations and fear of association with the accused are the crux of the problem. McLeod (2004) raises a crucial issue with regards to any legal attempt to deal with sorcery attacks: *‘prosecuting acts of violence is possible, but how do you outlaw a genuine belief?’*

Recommendations

Education: The first and most important recommendation is to attack beliefs in Sorcery through the education system, stressing instead an understanding of the real factors behind sickness and death. Stressing the negative impacts of sorcery accusations on households, clans and communities in terms of conflict, fear and suspicion can be done through plays and drama. There is a perception that sorcery beliefs are part of the unique cultural heritage of Melanesia. Therefore it is important to stress that similar beliefs exist, or have existed in the past, almost everywhere in the world, often with equally horrific consequences. In Melanesia itself, beliefs have evolved over time and have perhaps not always been as damaging as they are today.

Legal action: Although fear in sorcery overrides the fear of breaking the formal law, in the event that it is believed that an act of sorcery has been made, parties concerned and the community should be encouraged to take the matter to the appropriate courts to be settled under the Sorcery Act. Despite its imperfections, this would at least avoid extra judicial killings and other forms of punishment without trial.

Reform of the sorcery act: The 1971 Sorcery Act presupposes the existence of sorcery by criminalizing sorcerers as well as their torturers and killers; Zocca (2009) suggests that the law might be more effective if it criminalized *accusations of sorcery* instead. There is also the question of diviners and those community members whose support and approval make so many of the killings possible. Allegations and attacks

specifically aimed at female victims, highlights the need for the PNG Government to take action in terms of its obligation under the CEDAW convention.

Next steps for Oxfam:

1. A partner workshop could be held covering the causes and consequences of sorcery beliefs, the sorcery act and a comparison of different approaches to dealing with sorcery accusations. Staff at the Melanesian Institute, some of whom are from Simbu themselves, have conducted workshops on sorcery for church workers and could also be good facilitators of such events. The Institute is putting together a book for facilitators which covers all the necessary topics and could be a useful tool both directly for a partner workshop and for facilitators in communities.
2. In communities, partnership with the church could be an effective way of strengthening the impact that Oxfam's partners can have on reduction of sorcery-related violence. The material in Zocca (2009) suggests that the most progressive individuals are likely to belong to the Catholic Church rather than the Pentecostal, Evangelical or Lutheran churches. The Bishop of Kundiawa in particular may be a good point of contact when identifying the individuals concerned as he has campaigned against sorcery accusation for decades.
3. Oxfam should facilitate KWP to build networks with sympathetic church leaders who are able to identify and refer cases of sorcery to them: KWP could make victims of sorcery accusations one of their primary targets as clients and put in place a support program which goes beyond counseling to provide education, outreach and support for the displaced.
4. Oxfam needs to consider whether there is much that can be done at the national level in terms of advocacy. Whilst reform of the sorcery act and better protection for those accused are essential, it is not certain that Oxfam has channels through which these goals might be achieved. Recent research has received widespread publicity, helped by a surge in media interest, although this interest is not always to the benefit of the accused. The Melanesian Institute is currently working together with the government's legal advisors on the sorcery act and has provided them with recommendations for reform.
5. In terms of research, the large and recent studies by the Health Services and IMR and the Melanesian Institute discussed in this report, suggest that further research into sorcery in general is not needed; it will be important however for Oxfam to better understand the role and influence of the church in the rural areas in which it works in order to initiate dialogue with these actors at the community level. It would also be useful to know what is likely to happen to those accused of sorcery who *are* actually taken to court: for example what types of 'evidence' are accepted by courts in Gumine during sorcery trials and what proportion of those accused are actually charged or condemned for under the sorcery act itself.

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